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REVIEW

The Revolution Cannot Be Televised

Tamara Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), ISBN: 0-226-50991-5

Near the end of *Sans Soleil* (1982), Chris Marker's experimental, filmic meditation on memory, the political history of imperialism, cultural identity, and the incursion of appearances into reality, and, conversely, fact into storytelling, Alexandra Stewart the narrator reads from one of the letters by Sandor Krasna that run through the film:

"I remember that month of January in Tokyo, or rather I remember the images I filmed of the month of January in Tokyo. They have substituted themselves for my memory. They are my memory. I wonder how people remember things who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape. How has mankind managed to remember?"¹

Succinctly, the narrator articulates a central question of modernity: as the archive grows, and as the means of record-keeping are perfected, culturally (and collectively) we suffer a lapse in memory: "Everything works to perfection, all that we allow to slumber, including memory. Logical consequence: total recall is memory anesthetized."

If it is the rapid, technological advance in recording media that precipitates such amnesia, so the rise of new media simultaneously announces the end of history: "I'm writing you all this from another world, a world of appearances. In a way the two worlds communicate with each other. Memory is to one what history is to the other: an impossibility." In light of this situation, the narrator contrasts the "delirium" and "drift" with which memory must make do, given its modern circumstances, against the traditional, memoirist's wont to simplify history by treating moments as isolated evidence: "A moment stopped would burn like a frame of film blocked before the furnace of the projector." To remember, or to do history, is to engage in a kind of rambling enterprise; any appeal to traditional, historical practices

¹ *Sans Soleil*, Chris Marker, director (Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2007).

signals the anesthesia of modern memory.

The great, “delirious” aim of *Sans Soleil* is thus to remember; further, or what is the same, the film also practices history, and revolutionary, political history, in the only way that remains: by fits and starts, discontinuities and excisions. Marker’s film on memory and history thus shares something with Foucault’s own work on history (as a phenomenon and discipline): both are conducted in the wake of history as an institutionalized practice; or, as Friedrich Kittler notes in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*: “Foucault [is] the last historian or the first archeologist.” The historian’s craft that Foucault still wields in his archeological period, and that he culminates and overcomes with his turn to the “jolts ... surprises ... unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats” of genealogy,² recognizes the medium of writing while ignoring the techniques of its production. It is for this reason, Kittler continues, that Foucault’s archaeological “analyses end immediately before that point in time when other media penetrated the library’s stacks. For sound archives or towers or film rolls, discourse analysis becomes inappropriate.”³ Generalizing over the specifics of Foucault’s genealogical turn, what Kittler presses us to think is the possibility of remembering and of doing history—and how one might engage in these paired practices—in the era of the audio-visual archive. This is the main political question that threads through Marker’s film.

Consider in this regard the history of Guinea-Bissau’s war of independence against Portugal (1956-1974). In *Sans Soleil*, stock footage is shown of the leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), Amílcar Cabral, waving from the bow of a small motor boat as it pulls off the shore of Bijagós; Marker then cuts fifteen years forward to Cabral’s half-brother Luís recreating the scene. Except that the video record misleads: despite appearances, Luís Cabral is not leaving the shores of Bijagós but coming to them: “In an old film clip Amílcar Cabral waves a gesture of good-bye to the shore; he’s right, he’ll never see it again. Luís Cabral made the same gesture fifteen years later on the canoe that was bringing us back.”

The film lingers for a while on the Amílcar (half-)brothers and the history of Guinean independence. The narrator reflects on the guerilla tactics employed against the occupying Portuguese army; she notes, with regret, the use of the term “guerilla” to describe a “certain breed of film-making.” Such reflections are synched to old, black and white film showing the advance—or is it a retreat?—of liberation fighters pouring over a dusty meadow, crushing beneath them as they go the parched undergrowth. Then, once more, a cut forward in time: “And now, the scene moves to Cassaque: the seventeenth of February, 1980.” Guinea and Cape Verde are in the full

² Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 76.

³ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 105.

flush of independence. Luis Cabral is president of the new nation; he is shown at a ceremony decorating a soldier for his contributions to the insurgency. Once more, though, things are not as they seem: "But to understand it properly one must move forward in time. In a year Luis Cabral the president will be in prison, and the weeping man he has just decorated, Major Nino, will have taken power. The party will have split, Guineans and Cape Verdeans separated one from the other will be fighting over Amilcar's legacy."

We begin to feel the vertigo of the moving-image; or, better, since the feeling is more a temporal than a geographical disorientation, what we succumb to is the inertia of what Deleuze terms the "time-image [L'image-temps]":⁴ the uniquely modern form of audio-visual representation—and experience—that comes with the rise of the modern cinema. Yet, to identify the vertiginous relationship we moderns have to time with the medium of film is to overlook the more immediate influence of television. This insight lies at the heart of *Sans Soleil*. Krasna writes in one letter, which is read at length, of his experience watching Japanese television: he refers to the set as "that memory box"; the programming that follows is fittingly historical in character.

Cloistered away in a Tokyo hotel, hemmed in on all sides by oppressive black frames, we watch through Marker's lens a numbing day of television programming: first, there are the sacred deer of Nara; then a cultural program on NHK about the nineteenth-century French writer and dandy Gérard de Nerval; the Nerval program carries us to the grave of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, followed by an evening program on the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia; later still, after the killing fields, there is adult programming: "I did it all. All the way to the evening shows for adults—so called." Images from the day spent before Japanese television recur throughout the film; the persistence of the images suggests that the temporal vertigo of film—the "insane memory," as one Krasna letter describes the temporality of modern, cinematic and televisual imagery—is borrowed from the small screen. The narrator senses as much. In trying to juxtapose the Nerval/Rousseau show against images of Pol Pot, the voiceover wonders aloud: "From Jean-Jacques Rousseau to the Khmer Rouge: Coincidence? Or, the sense of history?"

This tentative speculation unfolds into the streets of Tokyo: the narrator voices Krasna's sense that the fine line between representation on television and life in the city has blurred. In one hypnotizing scene in particular, Marker shoots what seems an endless stream of commuters handing in their travel tokens to board the train; the transit official collecting the passes is at this moment indistinguishable from a ticket-taker at a movie theater. The further implication, which Marker captures on the faces of the commuters, is that they see themselves in a similar light.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

Watching modern life as if through the small screen of the television set—with a kind of senseless, disjointed exchange of images—is a matter of watching persons watch themselves in the same manner. To underscore this point, Marker takes footage from one of the adult programs from late night television and inserts it into the furtive glances young men cast on women on the train. Continuous, lived experience is a montage drawn from an ever-expanding store of footage. The metonymic principle of association and dissociation by which experience is thus edited together would seem to favor a Lacanian, psychoanalytic approach to a people and culture that has been televised.

Yet, to exploit this point of convergence between contemporary theory and modern media by isolating Lacan's actual appearance on television—and this is the strategy, generally, of *Turning on the Mind*, Tamara Chaplin's history of French philosophers on television⁵—is to miss the question(s) that Marker's film, for example, or Foucault's genealogy puts to us. With the rise of the machinery of recordkeeping is it still possible to remember? Is it still possible to have, and to do, history? And the political question that follows from these first two questions: In what manner—or in what "style" in a Nietzschean sense—are we to conduct an historical research that must call itself into question? Marker and Foucault may not offer ready answers to these questions, but in their non-narrative film-making and genealogical efforts, respectively, they acknowledge that they are "unable not to ask them today," as Foucault puts it in *The Order of Things*.⁶

Lacan—as Sartre and Camus before him and Lyotard and Foucault after him in their own ways—is always "on" television insofar as his theoretical questions of subjectivity and sexual difference are at the same time questions of the possibility of theory and how such theory can and should be conducted. Lacan puts the point plainly at the opening of *Television*, the transcript of his 1974 appearance on the cultural magazine show *Un certain regard*: "[T]here's no difference between television and the public before whom I've spoken for a long time now, a public known as my seminar. A single gaze in both cases: a gaze to which, in neither case, do I address myself, but in the name of which I speak."⁷ Lacan recognizes that his work, his ideas, and he himself are implicated in the changed circumstances of a modern culture that is used to being recorded/remembered and that is used to watching itself through such technologies. It is for this very reason, in turn, that Lacan is able to insist on the political character of his television appearance. The relations of power and desire that exist between the institutions of psychoanalysis and state-governed television

⁵ Tamara Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 307.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, "Television": *Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy*, translated by Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 3.

are gestured at or intimated throughout the broadcast. In playfully punning on the language of therapy and television, Lacan effectively draws the viewer's attention to the political space of this institutional exchange without thereby bringing it into full, televisual view.

Chaplin's book is at its finest—and indeed is at these points utterly captivating—when it allows theory and media to run together, mutually and reciprocally illuminating (and obscuring) one another. Two long passages stand out in this respect, though generally she is at her best in narrating the particulars of the programs. The first is a description of Foucault's December 1976 appearance on *Apo-strophes*; the second is her subsequent treatment of Lyotard's March 1978 segment on the short-subject program *Tribune libre*. It is here that the two intra-statist institutions of academic philosophy and public television are put in dialogue with one another; the great store of power coded in this exchange is exercised through the figures on the screen.

Rather than fitting these scenarios to the extrinsic demands of an historical narrative that is variously divided between how television helped the French “construct a post-War, national identity” and naturalize its growing immigrant population, and how select programs disproved the going assumption—though whose assumption this is, we are never sure—that “serious,” philosophical discussion can not reach the masses through television, Chaplin simply lets the scenes unfold. For a moment, we are left to glimpse the broad, affecting personality of Foucault and the knowing wit of Lyotard. In short, we are witness to performances on television of television. Yet, such performances are not unique to the modern theorist (or to the theorist of modernity); these just happen to be two occasions that the audio-visual archive has remembered.

This brings us back, finally, to Marker's successes in *Sans Soleil* in filming the political circumstances of modernity: the political can not be explicated, as Marker recognizes, but rather only suggested by editing. It is by cutting back and forth between the insurgent Amílcar Cabral and his presidential half-brother, Luís Cabral, that Marker projects the revolutionary politics of power-relations between a government and its radical elements. Marker's achievement in engaging the political in this way stands in sharp contrast to Chaplin's failure. Committed as she is to a general, historical positivism, Chaplin isolates French philosophers on television and in so doing enervates the political potency of a theory as it connects with other forms of discourse, other practices, and other institutions. To put this last point more concretely: it is not, as Chaplin comments at one point in the book, that the events of May and June of 1968 were not broadcast over the airwaves. Rather, it is that politics in the distinctly modern sense of relations of power, desire or force—and this is the politics of *les événements de Mai*—can not be televised.

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